



*"The integration of all elements -- environment, constructed sections, time, space, and people -- has been my main technical problem..."*

*Allan Kaprow*

## SYNOPSIS

Allan Kaprow was a pivotal figure in the shifting art world of the 1960s; his "happenings," a form of spontaneous, non-linear action, revolutionized the practice of performance art. While Kaprow began as a painter, by the mid 1950s his interest turned to the theoretical, based primarily on the shifting concepts of space as subjectively experienced by the viewer. Kaprow emerged from the group of artists known as the Rutgers Group, based out of Rutgers University where Kaprow taught art history and studio art. Kaprow was among the many artists and critics who focused on an intellectual and theorized view of art, rejecting the monumental nature of Abstract Expressionist works and instead focusing on the act of their production. In particular, his influential essay, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," (1956), called for an end to craftsmanship and permanence in art and instead demanded

that artists shift their attention to "non-concrete," or ephemeral, modes of production.

## KEY IDEAS

- Kaprow's happenings changed the definition of the art object. "Art" was no longer an object to be viewed hanging on a wall or set on a pedestal; rather, it could now be anything at all, including movement, sound, and even scent. Kaprow stated, "The everyday world is the most astonishing inspiration conceivable. A walk down 14th Street is more amazing than any masterpiece of art."
- Kaprow was very clear that his works were connected with art and not theater. He stressed that his happenings were in the same category as the action painting of Abstract Expressionists and not with scripted scenes involving actors playing parts. Kaprow's pieces involved spaces he physically altered, with sights and sounds as deliberately composed as any canvas by Pollock or Rothko.
- Kaprow rebelled against the prescriptions of Clement Greenberg, both in his art and in his writings: formal aesthetics, Kaprow believed, were no longer relevant when the art left the canvas. Kaprow's work was based on an "aesthetic of regular experience," a transient and momentary experience felt by the viewer being as significant as a painting on canvas.

## ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

### Childhood

Allan Kaprow was born in 1927 in New Jersey. During his early years, he experienced chronic illness that forced him to move from New York to Tuscon, Arizona where he spent the rest of his childhood. There, separated from his Jewish, middle class roots, he experienced life on a ranch, giving him a sense of the communal activity that came to dominate his later artistic career. Ill and often bed-bound, Kaprow began to develop an interest in arts and crafts, and eventually returned to New York to attend New York University and study Philosophy and Art History.

## Early training



Allan Kaprow's early artistic career was as an Abstract Expressionist; he trained at The New York School under Hans Hoffman from 1947-48. Developing a dynamic and expressive style, Kaprow had absorbed the action painting techniques of Pollock and the others, finding meaning in the physical ("action") relationship between the artist and his work. Moving from these studies to a major in Art History and Philosophy (with an M.A. thesis on Mondrian) under eminent historian and critic Meyer Schapiro, Kaprow began to construct action collages and assemblages with found objects. The references to everyday experience become an increasing interest to Kaprow, reviving the earlier motives of Dada and Futurist movements. Philosopher John Dewey's seminal work, "Art and Life" had a profound influence on Kaprow, leading him to experiment with notions of scale and with the incorporation of aural elements. The works Kaprow was producing at this time expanded to form *environments* - a more direct, sensory experience for the audience. In 1958, Kaprow wrote "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," an insightful and influential essay where Kaprow pronounced Pollock as responsible for pioneering the expansion of art beyond the frame and into the realm of human experience. This essay also marked the start of Kaprow's prolific art-writing career.

## Mature Period



Since 1955, Kaprow and other young artists from the **Hoffman** school had established and exhibited at the Hansa Gallery, an emerging institution on the New York art scene, where eventually Kaprow's notorious performative experiments took place. At the same time, Kaprow was teaching art history at Rutgers and attending classes of experimental musician, **John Cage**, along with **George Brecht**, **Al Hansen**, and **La Monte Young**. These young artists were becoming increasingly critical of the **Abstract Expressionists** for their neglect of experiential reference in their work. At this point, Kaprow began to adopt new methods of audience participation, incorporating performative and aural elements to create events experienced in real time. In this way Kaprow eliminated the subjects, structures, and narratives of conventional art practice. His practice became known as "the happening", a revolutionary element of the New York avant-garde of the 1960s. The happening, while spontaneous, has certain particularities. It could be performed only once, but in a range of guises: to a small audience in a loft or cellar, or as a larger scale public event on the street. The materials used were often perishable, giving the performance an ephemeral quality that denounced traditional preservation of the art object. Kaprow's ideas were not unique - the **Fluxus** movement had been formed by his contemporaries and the **Gutai Group** and artist **Yves Klein** were working internationally with a similar aim, as was **John Cage**. Kaprow was distinct in his choice to work alone, and in the substantial body of writing emerging around his events. While Cage's motives were to relinquish artistic authority to his participants, Kaprow delivered his vision through viewer involvement. He was notable for his relentless pursuit of lowbrow subject matter - the everyday processes, such as brushing one's teeth - and increasingly, the audience was eliminated, involving only participants. Throughout

the 1960's, the artist led happenings in sites of industry and commerce, in a further shift from the traditional art context.

## Late Period and Death

By the end of the 1960s, Kaprow began to disassociate himself from the term happening, which he saw as being exploited by the mainstream media. He started to follow a more private, introspective path, influenced by his studies in Zen Buddhism. He concentrated on creating intimate events he termed Activities. Working mainly with individuals or couples, these were now accompanied with an instruction booklet (gradually, Kaprow was eliminating the need for his presence in his work) and took place in increasingly domestic settings. Conversely, his acclaimed reputation had led to Kaprow retrospectives in galleries around the world. These exhibitions confronted the problem of displaying a vast body of work that fundamentally rejects the art environment and for which there is no lasting physical trace. As a solution to the lack of art object, the exhibitions were constructed from Kaprow's writing, archival photographs, the recollections of his participants, and the reinventions of his most important happenings. In 2001, he published his only book *The Blurring of Art and Life*, a compilation of the essays he had produced over the last five decades. Kaprow continued to teach until 1993 and was working on a major retrospective when he died in 2006.

## LEGACY



Kaprow presents a contradictory portrait; an artist seeking the direct and ephemeral relations between art, the artist, and the audience achieved in the "here and now" of everyday life, and a deep and prolific thinker, teacher and writer who meticulously planned and theorized every instantiation of his work. His lifelong quest to "unart" art practice had a profound and lasting impact on his contemporaries and on artists since, paving the way for Pop art, Conceptual art, Minimalism and new genre public art of subsequent decades. The embodied experience of the environment and the performative and real-time elements of happenings foreshadowed the Installation and Performance art common in contemporary practice, paving the way for artists like Vito Acconci, Suzanne Lacy, and Marina Abramovic.

*Original content written by Sarah Jenkins*

## **ARTIST QUOTES**

"Not only does art become life, but life refuses to be itself."

"Once the task of the artist was to make good art; now it is to avoid making art of any kind."

"I am convinced that painting is a bore. So is music and literature. What doesn't bore me is the total destruction of ideas that have any discipline. Instead of painting, move your arms; instead of music, make noise. I'm giving up painting and all the arts by doing everything and anything."

"You reveal something and its oddness by removing it from its normal usage."

"Experimental art is the one kind of art that can affirm and deny art at the same time. It's the one kind of art that can claim as value no value, ... the one caveat is that it must be called art."

"There are two directions in which the legacy could go. One is to continue into and develop an action kind of painting, which was what

he was doing, and the other was to take advantage of the action itself, implicit as a kind of dance ritual." - Kaprow writing on Pollock

### Major Works:



**Title:** Baby (1957)

**Materials:** Paper, aluminum foil, carpet pieces, oil and synthetic paint, chalk, and rope on masonite plates

**Collection:** Museum Moderner Kunst Ludwig Vienna

**Description:** *Baby* is an action collage, made from randomly assembled objects juxtaposed with cut-up pieces of Kaprow's own paintings. The only coherent and ordered element in the composition is in the formal arrangement of the elements into vertical strips. Kaprow produced the work in a frenzied, ritualistic process, influenced by the gestural quality of Pollock's action painting. Kaprow echoes the "combines" of Robert Rauschenberg in his synthesis of Pollock's technique with Cage's influence. Kaprow had moved toward an "unbound," three dimensional form, and was increasingly using found objects and everyday materials in an attempt to reconcile art with everyday experience, which would end up being his ultimate goal.



**Title:** Rearrangeable Panels (1957-9)

**Materials:** Oil, leaves, plastic fruit, and mirror on canvas and wood, with light bulbs

**Collection:** Musee National d'art Moderne Centre Pompidou, Paris

**Description:** This 1957 work represents a shift from the art object to the surrounding environment. Kaprow began to investigate the effect on space through the incorporation of three-dimensional and found objects into his work. Each time *Rearrangeable Panels* was exhibited, the curator or artist would be forced to make choices about how to configure the panels, foreshadowing Kaprow's use of audience participation. Kaprow challenges the notion of artistic authorship through this collaborative element of construction and in its unique response to each site in which it is placed.



**Title:** 18 Happenings in 6 Parts (1959)

**Materials:** A gallery divided into three rooms, semitransparent plastic sheets painted and collaged with references to Kaprow's earlier work, panels with words roughly painted, rows of plastic fruit, artist's hand-lettered instructions and programs, vintage posters, photographs, and videotapes

**Collection:** Photos and archives: Allan Kaprow Archives, the Getty Research Institute

**Description:** In this happening, the public was invited to complete a number of tasks using instructions outlined in a score. Kaprow used music theory with new developments in electronic music, theatre, and dance, all combined within a pioneering structure that demanded participatory involvement. *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* was performed at the Reuben Gallery in New York and is one of his earliest and most important Happenings, often cited as a turning point for performance art. Kaprow authorized a reinvention of this piece just a few weeks before his death and it was performed in Munich's Haus der Kunst in November of 2006.



**Title:** Yard (1961)

**Materials:** Rubber auto tyres, backyard of a Manhattan town house

**Collection:** Photos and archives: Allan Kaprow Archives, the Getty Research Institute

**Description:** Kaprow created *Yard* for Hauser & Wirth's opening New York show, *Environment - Situations - Spaces*. In this seminal work he recreated a junkyard, in the then Martha Jackson Gallery's backyard, creating an immersive environment with which the audience interacted. This work contained a high element of play, but within the boundaries Kaprow had prefixed. The piece illustrates sculpture's expansion in scale and the increasingly blurred boundaries between a "life like" and an "art like" art. In Kaprow's determination, there was no distinction between the viewer and the artwork; the viewer became part of the piece.



**Title:** Words (1962)

**Materials:** 2 small rooms, stencilled roles of canvas with hand letters, record players with words recorded by Kaprow, red and white light bulbs, dark blue smaller room - graffiti, hanging coloured chalk, strips torn from bed sheets, phonograph playing recorded whispers

**Collection:** Photos and archives: Allan Kaprow Archives, the Getty Research Institute

**Description:** *Words*, exhibited at the Smolin Gallery in New York in 1962, takes the audience on a journey through two rooms, encouraging them to contribute to written and verbal components as they progress. Through this interactive environment, Kaprow denotes "urban text" referencing graffiti, billboards, newspapers, overheard conversations, and a lecture, engaging the viewer in a multi-sensory experience that literally brings "words" to life. The importance of this piece is based in the responsibility of the viewer to become part of the creative process beyond passive involvement.



**Title:** Fluids (1967)

**Materials:** 30 walls of ice

**Collection:** Photos and archives: Allan Kaprow Archives, the Getty Research Institute

**Description:** *Fluids* is one of Kaprow's most ambitious works. In it, he recruited groups of local residents to build huge ice structures in various locations in Pasadena, CA during a mid career retrospective. The original "score" for the piece was displayed on billboards around the city. The idea of collective action resulting in the inevitable melting of the ice was a comment on the obsolete nature of human labor - a "dystopian allegory of capitalist production and consumption," refuting the permanence of the art object. Documentation of the event includes photographs, film, the billboard score, the artist's notes and drawings, letters and press clippings. This seminal work was reinvented in 2005 and as *Overflow* by the LA Art Girls in 2008 as part of *Allan Kaprow - Art as Life* posthumous retrospective at the Geffen Contemporary's space in LA MOCA.



**Title:** Grandma's Boy (1967)

**Materials:** mixed media assemblage

**Collection:** The Collection of the Newark Museum. Gift of Rhett and Robert Delford Brown

**Description:** This wall construction consists of various found elements with a mirror placed in the center. The name suggests a personal connection with Kaprow, though the photographs are of unknown figures. When catching their reflection, the viewer is unwittingly implicated in a participatory role, completing the piece. *Grandma's Boy* uses participation to give meaning to its form and illustrates Kaprow's move towards a more personal focus in his work.



**Title:** Trading Dirt (1983)

**Materials:** Soil, dog dirt, anecdotes, video recording

**Collection:** Photos and archives: Allan Kaprow Archives, the Getty Research Institute

**Description:** Kaprow produced the extended piece, *Trading Dirt*, when studying at the Zen Center of San Diego. He began by trading the soil in his garden for the "Buddhist dirt" of the center. This was then traded with various types of dirt collected by Kaprow. This sequence of events went on sporadically for three years, each exchange accompanied by an anecdote, recorded on film. Kaprow presents dirt as a metaphor that only gains meaning as it is exchanged or "traded." This occurred in 1983, long after Kaprow had replaced the Happening with the Activity. The work integrates storytelling with playful humour and illustrates a shift toward a more private, intimate participatory exchange. A film, *Trading Dirt with Simon Rodia and Allan Kaprow* by Rosie Lee Hooks and Paul S. Rogers, was created for the *Allan Kaprow: Art as Life* exhibition at MOCA Geffen Contemporary in Spring 2008 in addition to a reinvention of the piece.